DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 100 PS 021 653

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TITLE Does Parental Marital Separation Affect Infants?
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attachment Behavior; Behavior Problems; *Child Behavior; *Children; Cognitive Ability; Comparative Analysis; *Divorce; Emotional Development; *Family Influence; Family Structure; Foreign Countries; *Infants; *Mothers; Personality; Security (Psychology); Sibling Relationship; Social Development; Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This study compared the development of 38 infants from separated or divorced families with that of 38 infants from married families in Britain to determine whether parental divorce or separation precipitates cognitive, social, or emotional difficulties in infants. Infants were 11 to 45 months old. Infant-mother attachment was measured using the traditional strange situation laboratory procedure, and infant cognitive development was assessed using the Griffiths Scales of Mental Development. Infants with older siblings were observed interacting with their siblings at home for a 1-hour period on two occasions. Mothers completed the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire to assess infant temperament. Mothers also completed the Parenting Stress Index and the Life Events Survey, and were interviewed about their parenting experiences. Contrary to American studies, results from this study revealed more similarities than differences between the two groups. No differences in security of attachment, sibling relationships, temperament, or cognitive ability were found. Such patterns were found in spite of the fact that separated or divorced mothers experienced more stress than their married counterparts. Findings suggest that marital separation does not necessarily lead to child problems. (MM)

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DOES PARENTAL MARITAL SEPARATION AFFECT INFANTS?

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Based upon a poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, Louisiana, 25-28 March, 1993.

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined 38 male and female infants from separated/divorced families and 38 comparison infants from married families. Contrary to American studies on older children (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), this British study revealed more similarities than differences between the two groups. No differences were found in security of attachment, sibling relationships, temperament, or cognitive ability. Such patterns were found in spite of the fact that separated/divorced mothers experienced more stress than their married counterparts. The results suggest that marital separation does not necessarily lead to child problems.

Research on preschool and school-aged children has shown that those from divorced families perform worse than those from married families on cognitive, social, and emotional measures (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979). No study has investigated these children at the time of initial physical separation (during the child's infancy) thus it is not known whether problems emerge immediately or whether they develop between separation and divorce months/years later (about age four to six). Evidence that the custodial parent is unable to provide consistent and effective care (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) suggests that the former may be the case. Yet, it may be that exposure to inter-parental conflict (which may increase after divorce; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982) and economic hardship over the years (Weitzman, 1985) are causal of the deficits observed among older children. Alternatively, a sleeper effect may operate similar to that observed in children of depressed mothers (Ghodsian, Zajicek, & Wolkind, 1984). In this case, no effects are observed during infancy but problems appear at preschool age.

This study tests whether cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties are found among a sample of infants whose parents have separated due to marital difficulties.

SAMPLE:

The participants were 76 infants (age range 11 to 45 months, mean = 20.35 months).

Participants were selected from two different family circumstances: (1) Separated and divorced families, in which the mothers had been living with a husband or partner for at least five months (mean length of time living with partner = 4.96 years; sd = 3.44 years) and who had been separated for at least one month (mean length of time since separation = 13.13 months; sd = 9.59 months), and (2) Married/cohabiting families in which the mothers were still living with the fathers of their children (mean length of time living with children's father = 7.64 years; sd = 3.25 years). In each group there were 23 girls and 15 boys. Mean age of infant in the separated group was 21.82 months (sd = 9.10). Infants in the married group were aged 20.08 months (sd = 7.13).

INFANT MEASURES:

Infant-mother attachment was measured using the traditional strange situation laboratory procedure (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Cognitive development was assessed using the Griffiths Scales of Mental Development (Griffiths, 1954). Infants who had older brothers or sisters were observed interacting in the home for two one-hour periods. In addition, mothers completed the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979) which assessed infant temperament.

MOTHER MEASURES:

Mothers completed several questionnaires. The Parenting Stress

Index (Abidin, 1986) assessed the mothers' comfort with their role as parents. The Life Events Survey (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978) allowed the mothers to report the number of life events they had experienced in the past year as well as the positive or negative impact of those events. Mothers were given an intensive interview (lasting on average over three hours) about their parenting experiences. In-depth interviewing to obtain qualitative data is in the tradition of the British school of ethnography (e.g., Lewis, 1986; Newson & Newson, 1963). The qualitative material was used to support the quantitative differences between the groups.

RESULTS FOR INFANTS:

A trained rater who was blind to the hypotheses scored the strange situation videotapes. As can be seen in Figure 1, in the married sample, 26 of 37 infants (70%) were securely attached, five infants (14%) were avoidant, five infants (14%) were resistant, and one (3%) was disorganized. Among the infants from separated families, 20 of 35 (57%) were classified as securely attached, eight infants (23%) were avoidant, two infants (6%) were resistant, and five infants (14%) were disorganized. This difference between groups in the number of secure infants was not significant, Chi-Squared (1) = 1.34, ns.

There were no differences between the two groups of infants on any of the four scales of the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire. Figure 2 shows that in the married group, four children (11%) were rated as showing an easy temperament and ten

(26%) were difficult. The remaining 24 children in the married group (63%) were of average temperament. There were seven easy (18%) and eight difficult (21%) children in the separated group. The remaining 23 children (61%) were rated as average. This difference in the number of children showing different temperaments was not significant, Chi-Squared (2) = 1.06, ns.

Infants from separated families scored 106 points and infants from married families scored 107 points on the Griffiths Mental Development Scales. Thus, they were highly similar (see Table 1).

Infants and their older siblings from separated families were no more likely to engage in negative interaction than were children from married families. As can be seen in Table 1, infants from separated families engaged in eight negative behaviours per hour vs. 6.47 negative acts performed by infants from married families. This difference was not significant, $F(1,34) = 0.37$, ns. The older siblings in separated families were negative toward the infants on average 11.97 times per hour. This was similar to the 10.25 negative acts per hour performed by the older siblings in married families, and this difference did not reach significance, $F(1,34) = 0.47$, ns. For both separated and married families, older sisters of infants were more positive and friendly to the infant than were older brothers.

RESULTS FOR MOTHERS:

Separated mothers experienced 13.29 life events in the past year (sd = 6.88) and married mothers experienced 5.61 events (sd =

3.77). This difference was significant, $F(1,74) = 36.46$, $p<.0001$. As can be seen in Figure 3, there was also a significant difference for the negative change score, $F(1,74) = 21.42$, $p<.0001$. Separated mothers scored 13.13 points (sd = 11.06) on the negative change scale and married mothers scored 4.11 points (sd = 5.71). There was a significant difference on the positive change scale, $F(1,74) = 11.00$, $p<.01$. Figure 3 shows that separated mothers reported more positive change (12.11 points; sd = 9.00) than did married mothers (6.29 points; sd = 5.99).

Figure 4 shows that there was a borderline significant effect for marital status for the Parenting Stress Index total score, $F(1,73) = 3.91$, $p=.05$. Separated mothers tended to score themselves as more stressed in their role as parents than did married mothers (mean values = 335.49 [sd = 52.89; range = 230-443] and 312.26 [sd = 49.07; range = 230-431] respectively.

The interview revealed that both groups of mothers expressed the hardships of bringing up infants. Separated mothers further identified both greater difficulties (with finances and with feelings of isolation) and positive effects of separation (e.g., freedom to go out in the evenings without the children more often than married mothers).

DISCUSSION:

Marital separation affects mothers in that they experience more stress than married mothers. This is shown by the greater number and greater impact of life events. In addition,

separated/divorced mothers seem to feel more stressed in their role as parents. Our interviews support this view.

However, despite the stresses faced by separated/divorced mothers, they seem to be able to cushion their infants from adversity. These children do not appear to be adjusting more poorly than those in the comparison group. They are not more likely to develop anxious attachments to their mothers; they are not more likely to be aggressive towards their siblings. They do not seem to suffer in their cognitive attainment or in their temperament. (Note that our sample did NOT consist of high risk, poverty-stricken young mothers with unwanted pregnancies. Instead, they were moderately well educated and had lived with their partners for an average 4.96 years before separating.)

The results suggest that marital separation does not necessarily lead to child problems. It may be that problems observed by researchers of older children (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1979) were due to the longer amount of time spent living in a separated family, so that the effects will not become apparent until the child is much older. For example, the financial difficulties faced by the one-parent family may persist and result in detrimental effects on the children. Also, conflict between the parents may increase over time (Hetherington, et al., 1982) despite the fact that they are no longer living together. Although previous researchers (e.g., Emery, 1982) have suggested that marital conflict was the cause of later difficulties for children post-divorce, conflict prior to the separation does not explain the fact that the infants in our sample are adjusting

adequately 13 months post-separation. If problems arise at a later age, this cannot be attributed solely to pre-divorce conflict.

Alternatively, there may be a sleeper effect which will be revealed in later years. There is evidence of sleeper effects among children of depressed mothers (Ghodsian, Zajicek, and Wolkind, 1984), and a similar mechanism may operate among children with separated mothers. Tests of possible sleeper effects await longitudinal studies.

A final possibility is that the experience of parenting infants, while rewarding in many respects, also involves tremendous sacrifice. Due to the limited amount of father involvement in early infant care (Lewis, 1987) and the great stress that caring for an infant places on all mothers, it may be that the circumstances of separated mothers are not very different from those of their married counterparts. It may be that infants are so difficult to care for in the first place that parenting is not greatly affected by marital separation. Sensitive and responsive parenting may develop based on the individual qualities of the mother and the infant, and therefore may be equally likely whether a woman has a partner or whether she is living on her own.

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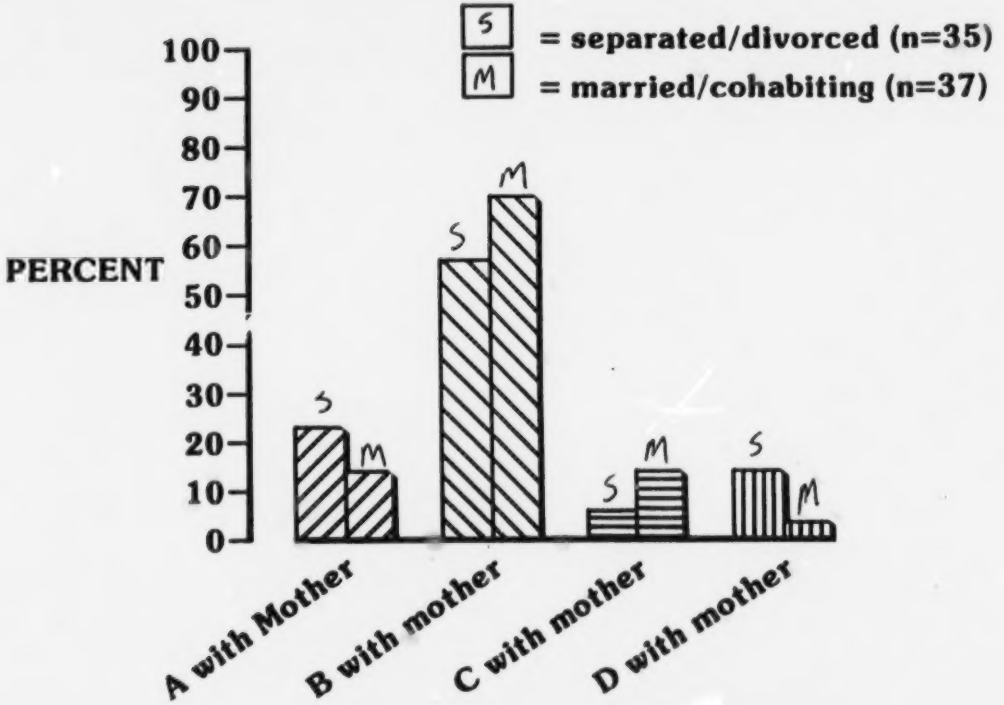
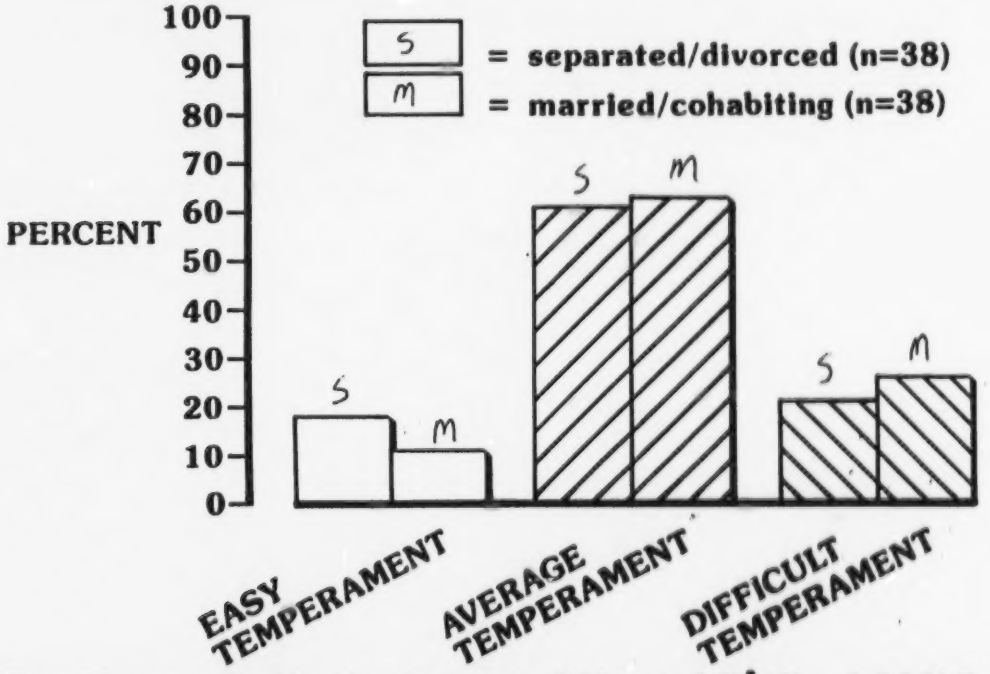
FIGURE 1
ATTACHMENT CLASSIFICATION FOR THE TWO MARITAL STATUS GROUPS



Secure/Insecure x Separated/Married $X^2(1) = 1.34$ N.S.

FIGURE 2

TEMPERAMENT CATEGORIES FOR THE TWO MARITAL STATUS GROUPS



Easy/Average/Difficult x Separated/Married $X^2(2) = 1.06$ N.S.

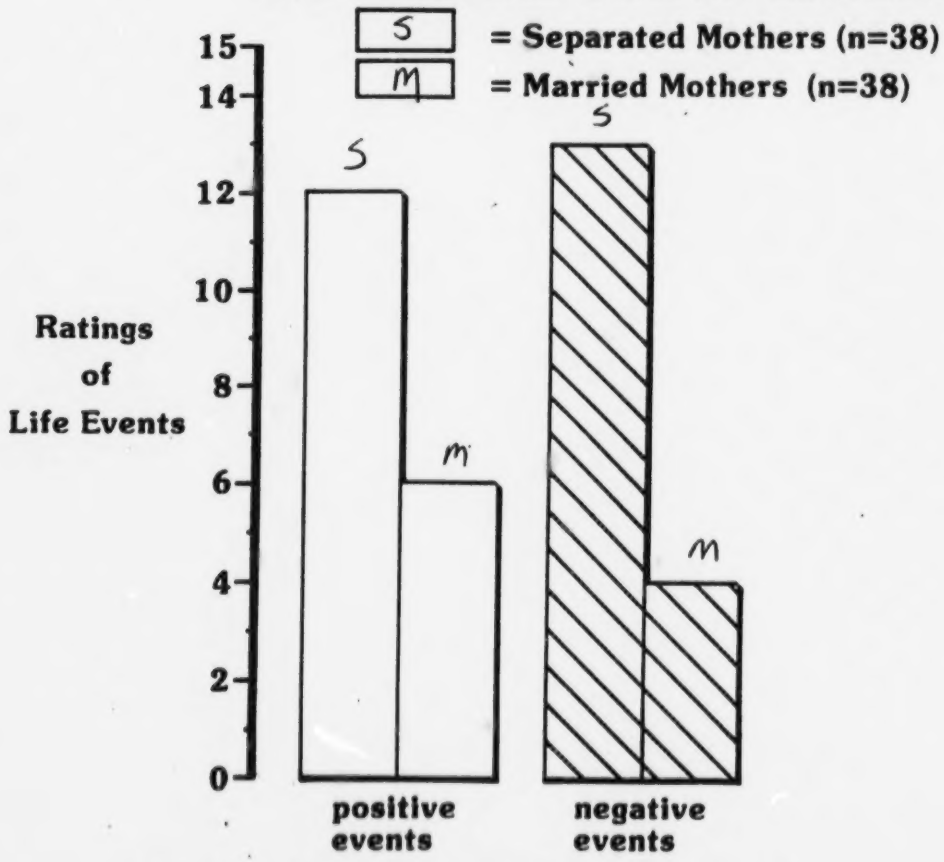
TABLE 1

MEAN (S.D.) DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN FOR THE TWO MARITAL STATUS GROUPS

ITEM	SEPARATED	MARRIED	F	df	p
GRIFFITHS COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT QUOTIENT	106.18(11.81)	106.71(9.03)	0.21	1,72	N.S.
INFANT NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SIBLING	8.00(7.47) (Frequency per hour)	6.47(4.66) (Frequency per hour)	0.37	1,34	N.S.
SIBLING NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS INFANT	11.97(7.92) (Frequency per hour)	10.25(6.98) (Frequency per hour)	0.47	1,34	N.S.

FIGURE 3

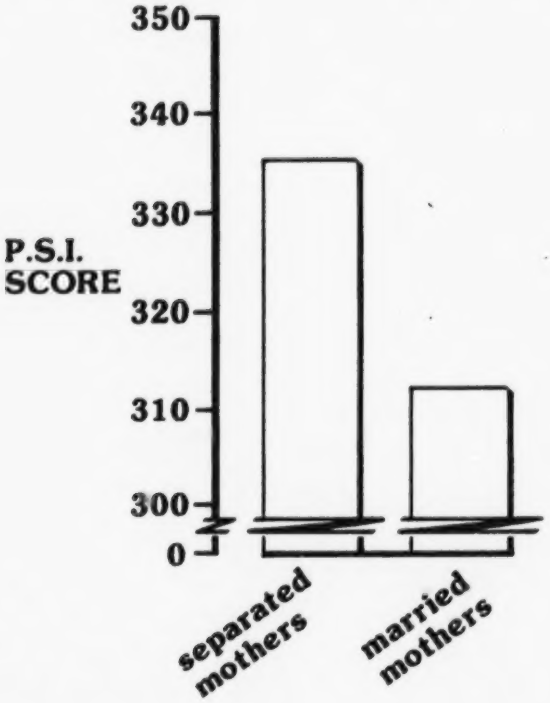
RATINGS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS FOR THE TWO MARITAL STATUS GROUPS



Positive Life Events $F(1,74) = 11.00$, $p < .01$

Negative Life Events $F(1,74) = 21.42$, $p < .0001$

FIGURE 4
AMOUNT OF PARENTING STRESS FOR THE TWO MARITAL STATUS GROUPS



F(1,73)= 3.91, p=05